Transatlantica
Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

1 | 2014
Exile and Expatriation

Catherine Armstrong, *Landscape and Identity in North America's Southern Colonies from 1660 to 1745*

Farnham, Ashgate, 2013

Carine Lounissi

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6833
DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.6833
ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher
AFEA

Electronic reference
Carine Lounissi, "Catherine Armstrong, *Landscape and Identity in North America's Southern Colonies from 1660 to 1745*", *Transatlantica* [Online], 1 | 2014, Online since 22 July 2014, connection on 29 April 2021. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6833 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.6833

Catherine Armstrong, *Landscape and Identity in North America's Southern Colonies from 1660 to 1745*

Farnham, Ashgate, 2013

Carine Lounissi

REFERENCES

ARMSTRONG, Catherine, *Landscape and Identity in North America's Southern Colonies from 1660 to 1745*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2013, 218 pages, ISBN 9781409406631.

1 In her monograph, Catherine Armstrong takes up the old but still debated and still unresolved historiographical question of the potential existence before the Independence of the United States of an American identity different from an English or a British one. Her contention is that traces of this other identity were visible in colonial times "culturally" (11) speaking. Her research is a contribution to Atlantic history as she focuses on "cultural transfer" (11) and reflects on the hybridity of this new identity that was at the same time "American," "colonial," "Atlantic," "British" and "creole" or perhaps none of them. Her focus is what she calls "the textual representation of the landscape" (11) in the Southern colonies. She relies on well-known sources, like William Byrd's travel diaries for example, and on more anonymous or less known ones such as letters, tracts and pamphlets. This work on printed and manuscript archives is an important aspect of the book which concentrates on Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia, the latter two having, especially since Jack P. Greene, been fully included in the historiography of the colonial Atlantic world.

2 Through six chapters devoted to the scientific, religious, political, economic, legal and wilderness-vs.-settled-area representations, she raises important questions about what it meant to be an American between the middle of the 17th century and the mid-18th century. She notably tries to establish whether there was a distinct "American"

approach to the subject matter of the "American" landscape of the Southern colonies. In the chapter about the scientific vision of American nature, she concludes that there was "no uniquely American way of cataloguing the natural world" (40), but unravelling this issue becomes more complex when dealing with promotional literature. In the chapter discussing the commercial dimension of the relationship of the colonies with their mother country within the British Empire, her reflection hinges on whether promotional literature was an American genre or a British one. She points out how settlers in Georgia criticized this literature because it contained idealistic representations of the colonies. This genre even became the source of a satirical treatment on the part of "American" authors in books that were "designed for an American readership" (90). She also shows how the representation of the American land in the writings published in England evolved in the 18th century as the productivity of the American colonies came to be ascribed to men's efforts and not to the bounty of nature merely. Such examples may help understand to what extent Benjamin Franklin's famous work published in 1782, *Information to Those Who Would Remove to America*, in which he opposed a work ethic to unrealistic visions of the American space-time, belonged to a tradition that had started early. The interrelated questions of the several readerships and of the circulation of printed material across the Atlantic but also among the colonies are central here, as C. Armstrong takes into account the "real reading community" (24) that existed at the time in the context of the birth of a "transatlantic republic of letters."

3 The literature that circulated between England and the colonies was linked to the economic agenda of both local and metropolitan authorities and lobbies. As is rightly stated at the beginning of chapter 5, "every representation of the landscape during this period is an economic one" (141). The physical characteristics of the American landscape were used by settlers, for instance to prove that the cultivation of tobacco was better adapted to the Virginian climate than to that of England where some wished to promote this crop. As important as this form of competition within the British Empire was the rivalry between the English colonies and the other European powers (France and Spain) which vied for North America at the time. The political representation of landscape or what C. Armstrong calls "imperial representations of America" (86) are more specifically addressed in chapters 3 and 4. She shows how this contest led the colonists or those who wished to colonize the American territory to enhance the Britishness of the(ir) landscape. The imperial competition for land led settlers to understand the strategic importance of landscape and of elements, like the Mississippi River, which should not be controlled by the French. The Mississippi was even compared to the Nile in a writing describing Carolina and published at the beginning of the 18th century. However, the geopolitical significance of the river, which was to prove even more prominent by the end of the century, was completed in the same writing by an aesthetic vision of it since it is presented as "consummate art" as opposed to "mere nature." This evinces to what extent several patterns were often interwoven in representations that were multifaceted. An example adduced to illustrate the conflict with Spain further confirms this: the manuscript of an anonymous ranger who travelled with Oglethorpe, the founder of Georgia, through Spanish Florida and who, according to Dr. Armstrong, "admired rather than feared the landscape through which he was passing" (132).

4 The issues of boundaries, borderlands and frontiers are, in this regard, essential. The material collected and studied here substantiates the fact that there was then no clear

division between "the settled area" and "the wilderness" in the Southern colonies in contrast to the North East. The frontier area had a quite traditional or expected role insofar as it was a space where identity was questioned, blurred and redefined: "the idea of the permeable, contested frontier" serves "to show that authors manipulated these representations to claim that Americans were simultaneously Englishmen abroad and a new type of man" (111). Yet, applied to the Southern colonies, the frontier motif reveals "the complex relationships of the borderlands [which] pitted Englishman against Englishman as well as against other Europeans and Natives" (140). Setting the borders of the colony and the limits of individual plantations were therefore major concerns for colonists—hence the key figure of the surveyor, which will be embodied a few decades later by Mason and Dixon. What C. Armstrong calls "legal representations of land" (186) made it possible for settlers to "define their relationship to the land with only minimal interference from London" (187). This appropriation of space led to the development of a "local autonomy" in the "control, management and distribution" of land (190). As a result, C. Armstrong reasserts the importance of ownership as central for the birth of an identity that was related to landscape: "the creation of plantations in the American landscape represents a significant intellectual as well as economic leap" (174). The maps on which landowners had their names printed played a role in this appropriation process. According to the historian, planters in the South invented a relationship to the landscape that was influenced by two factors: a "response to the particular environmental conditions" and "perceptions of social significance of land use inherited from England" (167). In the Southern colonies, slavery contributed to the definition of a specifically American identity and her study begins when slavery became a specific status different from indentured servitude. Dr. Armstrong's contention is that "the identity of the North American plantation owners was defined by their geography" (164), especially because they viewed themselves as different from "Caribbean planters".

5 In addition to the white male elite of the Southern colonies, the book takes into account less wealthy owners but also unusual ones for the time (women) and even non owners (slaves and Native Americans). In Carolina, widows and mothers were allowed to inherit their husbands' or sons' lands, as the study of wills evidences. Slaves could sometimes appropriate some places of the plantations and make it their own as they "considered the plantation their home too" (160). C. Armstrong underlines how slaves contributed to shape the agricultural landscape of Carolina by teaching whites how to grow rice and how to turn swamps into rice fields. The swamp was an important space in the representation of the Southern colonies. It was "a place of refuge" (162) for fugitive slaves before being a source of revenue. She demonstrates how such clichés of the dangerous wild areas where Natives initially roamed were reactivated in 1739 after the Stono rebellion. This well-known image of the Indians as an object of fear was countered in promotional tracts or reports as some presented the relationships between Native Americans and settlers as peaceful and harmonious in Georgia. Beyond these two commonplace visions, C. Armstrong has found evidence that some verbal pictures of Indians by "colonial authorities and settlers" were brushed "in measured tones" (126). Yet what remained often first and foremost in the colonists' minds was the "triangular relationship" (122) among the English, French and Indians.

6 Dr. Armstrong's conclusion is that "a shared Atlantic identity" (197) as well as "a unique southern backwoods culture" emerged in the Southern colonies. Her research is a valuable contribution to intellectual history, especially as she addresses the question

of appropriation through words of a space-time and analyzes how the different categories of people coming to America "symbolically conquered the territory" (45). One of the major difficulties when attempting "to trace a sense of difference among American settlers who did not merely consider themselves Englishmen abroad" (196) is precisely to manage to distinguish among (printed and unprinted) writings and documents written by settlers coming from England and from other parts of the British Empire, by those born in America, by English travellers, by authorities in Great Britain and in the colonies and also by those who had never been to America, like John Oldmixon. This intricate web is investigated here with many enlightening insights which do not fundamentally revolutionize the scholarship on the topic but further reveal the multiplicity of those identities and of the heterogeneous "imagined communities" in the Southern colonies.

INDEX

Subjects: Recensions

AUTHORS

CARINE LOUNISSI

Université de Rouen